

Tips for Writing a Competitive 319 Grant Proposal

With the number of applications increasing every year and new, more specific EPA guidelines on how Section 319 funds must be allocated, the Section 319 Grant program has become increasingly competitive in recent years. The Watershed Management Section (WMS) offers this guidance to provide insight to the grant selection process and tips on how to write a better, more competitive Section 319 proposal – one that will increase your group's chances for being funded.

The Review Process

Proposals received by the Watershed Management Section (WMS) are first reviewed for eligibility. Eligible proposals are then grouped according to project type and specific funding category for which they are eligible. While the technical and financial scope of proposed projects vary widely, grouping them in this way ensures that each proposal is competing against similar type projects for the limited funds available within each funding category. (For details on eligibility and funding categories, refer to <http://www.in.gov/idem/water/planbr/wsm/grapinfo.html>).

The proposals in each category are reviewed by Watershed Management Section staff and ranked, taking into consideration written comments solicited and received from other appropriate sections within and outside the agency. If sufficient funding is not available in a given category to fund all of the highest ranking proposals, some projects may be asked to reduce their budgets (and the corresponding tasks) or may have to be cut entirely. The remaining proposals selected are submitted to the EPA for final approval. All applicants are notified in writing of selection results typically within 2-3 months from the proposal deadline.

The Selection Criteria

Proposals are evaluated based on the criteria described below. Owing to the competitive nature of the 319 program, proposals typically are accepted/rejected based on a combination of these criteria. Although many approaches and/or practices are eligible for funding, some are more competitive than others. The following examples attempt to address the relative competitiveness of some of the more common approaches and practices proposed to address nonpoint source pollution problems.

What are the water quality problems?

Be as specific as possible about the magnitude and nature of the water quality problems you wish to address with your project. Proposals that cite vague and/or unsubstantiated water quality concerns are not as competitive as proposals that provide evidence of the water quality problems they wish to address. Provide as much support as possible for your concerns including water quality studies, data collected by state/other agencies, etc.

Is the proposed project cost-effective and appropriate to address the problem?

Reviewers judge the cost effectiveness of a proposal based on the budget and the proposed approach to solving the water quality problems cited. When developing your proposal, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Does your budget seem reasonable for each task as described in the proposal?

Reviewers pay very close attention to proposal budgets. For this reason, it is important to be as specific as possible in describing the tasks in order to justify the funds requested. Rule of thumb: The more expensive the task, the more explanation you need in the proposal regarding what that task entails.

- ◆ For example: If your project involves hiring someone to complete a series of tasks (e.g. watershed coordination), write a brief job description for that person, including the amount of his/her time allotted to each task. Add this information to your proposal in your discussion of tasks. Doing so will help both you and the reviewers determine whether the funds requested are reasonable and consistent with the actual costs for each task.

2. Does your proposal reflect a balanced approach to solving your water quality problem?

The stakes for project success are much higher when all or most of the project funds are narrowly directed at a single issue. With respect to implementation projects, an approach that addresses a given problem in more than one way or that addresses more than one problem is preferable.

- ◆ For example: Stream bank and shoreline stabilization projects are typically very expensive and are not always effective long-term solutions to water quality problems. Although these practices are eligible for funding, proposals that combine these approaches with other measures, particularly those that address the upstream issues contributing to the problem, are more competitive than those that don't.

3. Does your approach to solving the water quality problem include measures that address the problem at its source? Proposals that include measures to address upstream issues in the watershed contributing to the problem are more competitive than "quick fix" approaches that address the symptoms of the problem.

- ◆ For example: Although in-stream sediment traps are eligible for funding, proposals that include measures to reduce sediment delivery from upstream sources are more competitive.

4. Where will 319 funds have the most impact? Are the measures you propose aimed at solving the most significant problems in the watershed or, would the funds you request have a bigger impact elsewhere?

- ◆ For example: Septic system replacement is eligible for funding through the 319 program. However, the problem of failing septic systems is so widespread in Indiana that cost-share for replacement of these systems cannot possibly be funded at a level that would produce significant reductions in NPS pollution with the limited 319 funds available. Proposals that present other means of addressing septic issues as part of a broader approach to implementing watershed management plans are more competitive than those requesting primarily septic cost-share funds.
- ◆ For example: If implementing a watershed management plan, are the proposed areas for implementation consistent with those identified as priorities in your plan? Reviewers will compare the approach outlined in your proposal to the areas identified in your plan as most in need of implementation. Inconsistencies between your proposal and your watershed management plan will make your proposal less competitive.

Is the proposed solution technically feasible?

Are the measures you propose capable of producing the desired outcome?

- ◆ For example: Can the type and scope of water quality monitoring you propose realistically answer your questions in 2-3 years (the typical timeframe for 319 projects)? While developing your proposal, if you are considering water quality monitoring, think about whether the type of monitoring you envision will provide enough and the appropriate types of information that you need.

Are the practices you propose appropriate for the water quality problem you are trying to solve? Is there an equally cost-effective practice that might provide better results? Reviewers will look at this issue and, if you are implementing a watershed management plan, will also look to see if the types of practices are consistent with those outlined in the plan. If the practices you wish to implement are not supported by a watershed management plan, explain in your proposal why you chose them.

Does the project have local support?

Local support for a watershed project greatly enhances its chances for success. Reviewers use the support letters you submit with your 319 application to determine the nature of the partnerships you have forged in your watershed efforts. Groups that have made the effort to engage other organizations and the public in their efforts are much more competitive for funding than groups that work in relative isolation. Investing some time in soliciting local support and building partnerships before submitting your proposal will make it more competitive. When you develop your proposal, do not just list project partners – describe the extent of their involvement and any matching funds and/or in-kind services they may be providing.

Other Helpful Hints

Start Early

- ◆ The WMS strongly suggests that you submit a draft of your proposal at least one month prior to the October 1 deadline. While not required, this type of informal review provides an opportunity for you to receive and incorporate comments and suggestions aimed at strengthening your proposal.
- ◆ For currently funded watershed management planning projects intending to submit a proposal for implementation funding prior to completion of their plan, a draft of the plan should be submitted at least two months prior to the application deadline. Submitting a draft of the plan for preliminary review provides an opportunity for you to receive feedback on your plan and enables reviewers to ensure that the practices in your proposal are consistent with those cited as priorities in the plan. Proposals for implementation of plans that have never been reviewed by the WMS are not competitive. Also, the more specific the proposal is regarding what parts of the plan will be implemented, the more competitive it will be.

Do Your Homework

The WMS has many documents available online or by request to help you familiarize yourself with the program, its priorities, eligibility and other requirements (which may change from year to year). Take advantage of these resources. It is usually evident in the proposals which groups have invested the time in learning about the program from which they are requesting funds. This investment of time (or lack of it) is regarded by reviewers as an indicator of a group's commitment to the project proposed. Program information is located online at <http://www.in.gov/idem/water/planbr/wsm/319main.html> or may be requested by calling Doug Campbell at (317) 233-8491.

The Watershed Management Section staff is available to assist you in the development of your proposal. We encourage you to contact any staff member if you have questions.

Contact information for staff can be obtained by calling (317) 233-8491 or at:
<http://www.in.gov/idem/water/planbr/wsm/contact.html>